7: Thompson--373 J-4 (no date) 1937 Laotians
116, 193, 536, 538

"The Laotian tongue is very simple. It is mainly monosyllabic: the article is never used, and substantives are not declined. Profane literature includes historical works, chiefly the annals of Luang-Prabang as well as its codes of law, novels, and songs. There is a large sacred literature, a very small part of which has been translated from Pali into the vernacular. Their drama is akin to the Khmers' in length, costuming, and music. The themes are epic, religious, or bellicose history, love stories and legends, mostly taken from the Vedas, the Ramayana, and Mahabharata. Many Khmer and even Burmese plays, with a modern satirical tone, lend a cosmopolitan character to the Laotian repertoire. A kind of marionette theatre, analogous to the Javanese, exists as well."

15: Benedict--388-389 L-5 (no date) 1947 Laotians
116, 171, 212, 538

"The Lao script was derived from Khmer writing, probably in the thirteenth century. It is a simpler archaic version of Siamese writing, which is also of Khmer (and ultimately Indian) origin. The White Tai and Black Tai of Tonkin employ similar alphabets, possibly later derivatives of the Lao alphabet. Remarkably enough, the White Tai of Nghê-an, under Annamese influence, write this script in vertical lines, from right to left, as in Chinese! Lao literature naturally has much in common with Khmer literature, as described above, and bears the same deep imprint of Buddhist India. Native Lao (Thai) features are apparent in the more folkloristic aspects of the literature, however, and the poetic forms are [389] much freer than those of Khmer."

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Ever since the death, singers and improvisers of both sexes accompanied by volunteer musicians had recounted the merits, qualities and exploits of the deceased at great length and with emphasis before a numerous audience which remained attentive and never grew tired. They boasted of his good deeds, listed his particular habits and tastes and enumerated his many children and grandchildren.

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They dwelled with great satisfaction on the intimacies which he had taken with the fair sex up to quite an advanced age, and in support of their remarks showed brightly illuminated drawings painted on long streamers of glazed calico. These drawings, as much by the truth of the attitudes shown as by their outrageous realism, were the joy of the spectators. Both children and adults roared with laughter as they listened to the highly spicy commentary of the improvisers.

A curious fact was that this exhibition did not occasion any obscene or even suggestive gesture on the part of the audience.

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The bonzes, who are the only art students in this country, are the ones who color these pictures. If published in our own land, the latter would certainly call down all the rigor of the law on their author.

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The day of cremation finally came, and the funeral proper began.

One of the sons of the deceased first set free two pairs of partridges and turtledoves, pet birds which he had had. The poor creatures were unaccustomed to flight and refused to leave their cage, but then beat their wings and clumsily escaped to a perch a few meters above ground on one of the trees [207] in the garden. A trail of ashes was spread all around the fence surrounding the house of the deceased in order, as popular belief has it, to prevent his spirit from escaping into the nearby region and tormenting the living.

[175]

A solid bamboo stretcher which twelve hardy men would carry on their shoulders was placed on the ground to await the catafalque. Attendance was heavy, and people of all ages came from a distance. They wore their holiday clothes with vivid, light and iridescent colors. They wore flowers in their ears and hair and carried multicolored streamers, wax candles and sticks of incense in their hands.

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The members of the family, the officials of the Muong and the bonzes were also there in force.

The catafalque was carried from the house by hand and put down on the stretcher, which the porters then raised to their shoulders. At its base, near the feet of the deceased, was fastened a strip of calico

534 meters in diameter. By striking the gongs with these two hammers or brushing against the gongs with them, musicians succeed in playing certain local airs which, although their sounds are somewhat sharp to the ear, are nonetheless harmonious at a distance.

"These various instruments are frequently joined together to form orchestras which play in comparative harmony.

533 "There is no method of musical notation. Memory and routine are the performers' only guides. Their memory is adequate enough and their mastery of the instruments sufficient to provide their listeners with a fairly varied repertory." (Le Laos français.)

[216] Songs and singers. Songs and improvisations enjoy a great vogue in Laos, and are an obligatory feature of every feast and every ceremony. They also serve to keep up the spirits of boatmen and to break the monotony of traveling.

Talents as singers and improvisers are generally shared by both sexes. The same person will often have both these abilities, which are to some extent the heritage of certain families.

538 The songs consist of poems which form a kind of anthology or "Folk-Lore" of the land. Everyone knows some snatches of these 533 stories, which they hear over and over again without tiring of them and which are handed down intact or embellished with new parts from parents to their children and from the old to the young.

The improvisations are recitatives in the vulgar tongue or in Siamese which are composed according to circumstances. Certain songs are delivered in a language unknown to the Laotians, but which they repeat like the litanies of Buddhism with, so to speak, a ritual cadence and intonation.

Singers and improvisers of both sexes are called Mô-Lam or Mô-Kab-Lam, and the poems which they recite are called Kam-Kong. These artists are very well trained and are capable of singing aloud for twelve hours at a stretch without showing any trace of fatigue or lassitude, whereas even the hardiest kene players cannot blow on their instruments for more than about an hour.

Love stories, invocations, inspirations, memories, news items, legends, prophecies, voyages, catastrophes, etc. are all matters for improvisation. All these songs are arranged, amplified or distorted to suit the particular turn of mind, the fancy, the spirit or the merriment of the author and to suit the occasion and the moment.

538 With his somewhat caustic but not malicious verve, the improviser excels in mixing the modern with the ancient. He takes particular

satisfaction and finds a pleasant test of his abilities in setting words to refrains whose meaning is unknown and in stimulating laughter or pleasant and amusing ideas in his audience, either by vaunting the joys of love and the plastic perfections of the human body, or by recalling [217] useful or pleasant memories, or by honoring justice and goodness. The morals of these folk, who are indolent because they are content with very little and are happy and healthy, and to whom all our subtleties are unknown, permit the greatest license in songs and improvisations and the greatest realism and crudity in the expression of thoughts.

In spite of this, there is not the least unhealthy intention in either the poet or his audience. As we have seen above in connection with burials, children of both sexes attend all these festivities accompanied by their parents. They all take pleasure in the same refrains and laugh at the same funny sayings, not because they are vicious but because they are pure pagans for whom enjoyment and pleasure are like gods. The songs are animated by graceful gestures, and together with the music form a whole which is poetic according to their particular esthetic canons and which is simply a manifestation of art and not an indication of loose morals.

Theater. The Laotians also have a dramatic repertory consisting of longwinded plays, epics, religious and warlike stories, romantic tales, ancient legends, etc. These poems are played by several actors, with an orchestra and supernumeraries, and require many very ornate costumes which have not varied in form since the earliest times. Usually, however, the costumes are mere tinsel.

Like the Cambodian and Siamese theater from which it comes, the Laotian theater interprets age-old works taken from the Védas, the Ramayana or the Mahabharata. To this repertory are added purely Kmer plays and various adaptations of Burmese origin which are performed in the classical costumes and in which a strong tinge of comedy and modernism and a bit of satire are mingled with the ancient traditions.

Women are excluded from the theater, and the female roles are played by young men. As in the case of songs and improvisations, dramatic knowledge, the repertory of plays and the art of acting are handed down from father to son. The actors are called Lakhone and plays are called Kam-Kong-Lakhone or Kam-Kong [218] Fone-Lakhone if they include dances or ballets. Finally, one last dramatic genre

village and those of ancestors. Prayers for the dead are said, and 782
when they are over the head and feet of a goat, crude clay statuettes 769
representing two men, two buffalo and two oxen, and numeroux wax
candles are placed on a raft made of banana trees. The raft is
launched full into the current of a river while men collect on the
banks and fire salvos of shots and shoot off fireworks.

The musical instruments of the Thais are the "Kene" and [240] 534
a kind of clarinet with two tubes, reinforced by gongs and tom-toms.

Their songs are not at all noisy and are much more like mono- 538
tonous chants.

The Thais have a very characteristic game, and this is the game 524
of the "inexhaustible jar." A jar of rice beer is placed on the floor
of a house and five bamboo tubes stuck in it to serve as straws. Five 273
men take positions around the jar, and each of them puts a tube in
his mouth. Into each of the jars, and above a kind of porous stopper
made of pressed paddy husks, water is poured by means of an ox
horn with a hole in the end. At a given signal both men and women
begin to suck conscientiously while the contents of the ox horn are
poured into each jar three times in succession. The ones who empty
their jar first win, and the losers have to drink the contents of ten
horns of water poured over what is left of the beer in their jar.

The Thai beer does not have a bad taste, and its alcoholic
strength is equivalent to that of hard cider, which it closely resembles
in flavor. Although the additions of water decrease the beverage's
percentage of alcohol it nevertheless produces a slight intoxication,
due primarily to the speed with which it is sucked through the straw.
But the inebriety never degenerates into a quarrel, and provokes
nothing but laughter, songs and unadulterated merriment.

Who would believe that the Thais have the custom of throwing 527
"confetti"? Nothing is more true, however, for in the celebrations
at the end of harvest, which take place in December or January,
the merrymakers throw cotton seeds mixed with paddy, with husks,
and sometimes also with ashes.

He[1] must never look at a woman. However a few old women are seen in the pagoda. These are the devotees. They are dressed in white, their heads are completely shaved, and they lead a life of observance and asceticism which is as rigorous as that of the monks. They render small services to the bonzes, decorate the altar, etc., but they live outside the enclosure of the pagoda. 792 785 562

Laotian Buddhism.

In a recent pamphlet, His Excellency Thao Nhouy Abhay, former Minister of National Culture and Education, wrote: "In its intrinsic substance Buddhism is deeply tolerant, but ours [26] has truly become not austere enough." Therefore he proposes some necessary reforms which would quickly raise the intellectual and moral level of the bonzes in Laos. There are two sects in Laos: the Mahanikay and the Thammayut. The only difference between the two is the way in which they consider that monastic rule should be observed. Nothing distinguishes them in appearance except the color of the monastic robe of the Mahanikay, which is brownish-ochre almost chestnut. The king is the chief of the Buddhist clergy. As for the believer who regularly observes his religious duties, he is satisfied with little and gives much in alms. Buddhist tales and particularly Laotian texts, among them the Pannasajataka (Ha Sip Xat), quote all the merits acquired for future lives by those who give alms and, above all, feed the bonzes. 779 795 [792] 643 [735]

Religious Literature.

The basis of the religious literature of Laos is the Buddhist Tripitaka. These "Three Baskets" contain the integral "word of the Buddha." 779 538

The basket [corbeille] of Vinaya (Vinayapitaka) is the rule of monastic life. It consists of five sections: Patimokkha, Mahavagga, Coullavagga, Souttavibhanga and Parivara. The Patimokkha is meant to be read in public (particularly on the feasts of the eighth month), on the periodic days of confession. The Mahavagga and the Coullavagga give the list of daily obligations, illustrated by examples drawn from the life of the Buddha. The Souttavibhanga is really a commentary on the Patimokkha; finally the Parivara is both a revision and a catechism.

The Basket of the Soutta (Souttapitaka) contains an enormous amount of preaching and of edifying tales. Among others, the famous Dhammapada, a treasury of the sayings of the Buddha and the Jatakas are to be found in this basket.

[27] The third basket is that of Abhidharma and consists of seven

1 [i.e., a bonze --Analyst]

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538 treatises on metaphysics.

[198
179] Such is the whole of the Buddhist canon in force in Laos. Unfortunately, as the knowledge of Pali disappeared, many texts were forgotten because they were not understood and therefore were not followed. But certainly the most popular text and that which forms the core of all Buddhist literature is the Jatakam.

The Jatakas.

This name is given to a collection of tales about the former lives of the Buddha. As the Master is supposed to have had the greatest variety of experiences from the animal state to that of a god, going through the different states of humanity, his long career as bodhisattva provides ample material for stories of all sorts, moral tales, satirical tales, parables, fables, etc. These stories have no equivalent in any literature, for Buddha knows not only his own births, but also the former births of all creatures, and these he relates as the occasion presents itself. The method of exposition is always the same. The narrator tells more or less briefly the circumstances giving rise to the story of the Buddha, then comes the story itself, finally by way of conclusion, the Buddha relates the past to the present by indicating the identity of the characters in their various roles.

The greatest number of Jatakas take place at the time when "Brahmadatta reigned in Benares," which is the equivalent of our "once upon a time."

In these tales the Buddha appears in the most varied roles; he is in turn ascetic, king, scholar, courtier, brahman, prince, noble, merchant, landlord, slave, potter, elephant-driver, woodcutter, mason, thief, actor, student, etc. Sometimes he is a god or the deity of [28] a tree, sometimes merely an animal, such as a serpent, a lizard, a bull, a pig, a dog, etc. The Buddha has none of the prejudices of nobility. Instead he gives a comforting example of how in all ranks of creation one can realize perfection in oneself and serve the collective interests of the universe. The most incongruous materials are harmoniously blended in this incoherent collection which is always frank. The whole Indian folklore is poured into this convenient framework, where it has received the Buddhist stamp, and been spread throughout the whole Far East where it has been received with enthusiasm.

There are 547 Jatakas. Some are more popular than others. Thus, in Laos, there are ten which form a special collection called "Sip Xat" (the ten Jatakas). The best known are the Temiya Jataka: (Cf. Appendix: Luang Prabang).

779 "The prince heir to the throne Mugapakkha remained dumb until 538 he was thirteen years old. He recovers his speech at the moment when his father wants to bury him alive. He then explains his previous silence by showing that an inconsiderate word may be the cause of great torment in future existences for him who has uttered it." And the Sama Jataka:

"Sama who fed his father and mother, who were both blind, dies of a wound inflicted unintentionally by king Kusi who was deer hunting. As Sama is dying, he entrusts his murderer to break the news to his parents, who lament so painfully that Sakkha is moved and brings Sama back to life."

But of all, the most popular is unquestionably the Pha Vet, the Laotian name for the Vessantara Jataka. (Cf. below Boun Pha Vet).

There exists another series of Jatakas which rival the five hundred Jatakas in popularity. It is the Pannasajataka (Ha Sip Xat) or the fifty Jatakas. This very peculiar text is found in [29] all the literature of [101] western Indochina, and was probably composed in Thai country. Versions exist in Burmese, Khmer, Siamese and Laotian. The Laotian rendition has the peculiarity of containing 27 out of 50 tales which are not found in any other version. These 27 stories are entirely original. They are at the moment in the process of being translated.

Finally the five hundred Laotian Jatakas form a convenient framework into which all kinds of stories in the current language have been inserted. Their study will doubtless prove a mine of information on local folklore.

THE PHI

771 We cannot conclude the chapter relating to the religion of Laos
776 without mentioning the cult of the Phi.

In his books "La Participation" and L'Evolution humaine" the late lamented Jean Przyluski distinguished three successive phases of religion which, according to him, are related to an economic and social state.

When man is a collector of food, that is, when he lives from what he can gather or hunt or fish, his religion is vegetalism or totemism. When he becomes a producer, man's religion becomes agrarian, honoring the gods of vegetation, of the earth, the forests, etc., and particularly the protecting genie of the village. Finally, in the period of urban communities, universal gods appear.

While some reservations might be made on this classification, it does nevertheless offer a convenient framework in which we can

inverting the order of words. The negation bo is added. Is the gentleman home? is translated Tan you ban bo? Sometimes a single word contains a whole phrase:

mi = there are.
dai = it is possible.

Vocabulary. In addition to the pronunciation of sounds, one of the difficulties of the Laotian language is the distinction between noble language and popular language. The language is different when one addresses the bonzes, the high dignitaries, the king. There is a very rich concrete and abstract Laotian vocabulary which unfortunately is tending to go out of use. We have found in manuscripts Laotian words translating textually [78] abstract Pali words, but they have been gradually forgotten. The Laotians no longer read enough of their original texts. Cheap Siamese literature has invaded the country making the people abandon their own language.

One of the urgent tasks is to bring back the old Laotian texts into honor and to spread them abroad again among the public.

[79] LITERATURE AND MUSIC

In addition to the canonical religious literature already discussed, Laos possesses an important literary treasury. But as in Cambodia, Siam and Burma, this literature is anonymous. We are in the presence of epic texts of Indian origin, of legendary traditions, of apologues, of legal, moral or comic tales. There exist also novels, but as in French "romances" of the Middle Ages, they are by unknown authors. There is no equivalent in Laos of a Kalidasa or of a Li T'ai-po. No philosopher or dramatic author is known.

If the name of a French writer were mentioned whose manner is closest to that of Laotian authors, it would be that of Charles Perrault, and this in a word characterizes the type of Laotian literature. It excels in wonderful tales.

Literature of Indian Inspiration.

In addition to the Jatakas, Laos possesses at least two great texts of Indian origin. This is said under reservation of further discoveries, for in spite of the important work of Louis Finot, "Recherches sur la littérature laotienne," we are still far from knowing all the treasures of the Laos pagodas.

a) The Pancatantra. The first text is a collection of tales copied from the famous Indian Pancatantra. In the Middle Ages

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101 these tales were spread throughout the world in an extraordinary way. They penetrated many literatures by [80] word of mouth or in writing. But at first the means of propagation was a Pahlavi version made at the request of the Sassanid king Khosroes Anoshirvan (531-579). From this version a first Syriac translation and an Arabic transcription were made. The work became very widespread throughout the whole of Islamic literature. At the beginning of his sixth book, La Fontaine says that he has drawn the subject of a large number of his fables from those of the Indian sage Pilpay (doubtless Vidyapati), but the material was furnished to him through an Arab intermediary of the eighth century, Kalila-wa-Dimna. Finally, it should be remembered that the prologue forming the framework of "The Thousand and One Nights" is found in the Pancatantra.

The same thing happened to this text in the Far East. It is found in Java, Siam, Cambodia and Vietnam. At Vientiane it exists under the name of Mulla Tantai. This collection is unknown at Luang Prabang, but the text is found in a collection of five works called Pakon. In the first four books only tales of a similar character are grouped in a common framework. The fifth is merely a series of comments on the texts of the Vinaya and has no relationship with the Pancatantra.

These works are compiled under a uniform plan: a subject being discussed, each person who takes part in the debate expresses his opinion and bases it on a story (Finot).

The story begins with the prologue forming the framework:

"There was once a king who, while walking one day in his park, saw a young married woman who pleased him. He ordered his minister to bring him every evening a young virgin of good family under pain of death for him and his family. After some time there remained in the town only a single maiden, the daughter of the minister Nang Tantai (the Laotian Scheherazade). [81] They had to lead her to the king, but she was cautious and reassured her parents as to her fate."

It is well known how the king, charmed by the tales told by this young girl, married Nang Tantai who became queen.

b) The Ramayana. The extraordinary popularity in Asia of this Indian epic is proved by the many versions of it one finds: Chinese, Tibetan, Javanese, Malayan, Vietnamese, Khmer, Siamese, etc.

The Laotian version was somewhat neglected until recent years, because it was supposed to be only a copy or translation of the Khmer text or the Siamese version. We have undertaken to study it, and it

538 101 shows us, on the contrary, that this is a profoundly different text, differing not only from the two lessons already quoted but also from that of Valmiki which is the source of inspiration of all the others.

Because of the newness of the problem, it would be at least premature to indicate now the origins of the Laotian text and to establish its relationship to other known versions. Therefore we will limit ourselves to recalling the essential part of the poem of Valmiki and to stating what we learn from the Laotian version.

538 The Ramayana of Valmiki. The story of Rama, son of the king of Ayodhya, takes place mostly in India. Persecuted by a jealous stepmother, the young prince and his wife Sita are exiled. He is accompanied by his brother Laksmana. Attracted by Sita's beauty, Ravana, King of Lanka (Ceylon), carries her off after removing Rama and Laksmana who pursue a golden gazelle which the king has created by magic. Thanks to his alliance with Sugriva, King of the Monkeys, Rama sends the monkey Hanuman as a messenger to Sita, then attacks Lanka. He kills Ravana and wins back his wife. But the latter is [82] suspected of being unfaithful and submits to ordeal by fire. Rama then brings her to Ayodhya.

The Pra Lak Pra Lam (Laotian Ramayana). Nang Canda, daughter of Dacaratha, king of Candapurisisattanagamahanagara (Vientiane) was carried away by Ravana, son of King Indapattanagara. Dacaratha begs the god Indra to give him a son capable of killing Ravana. Indra sends his own son Pra Lam (Rama) who, with the aid of his brother, brings Nang Canda back to Vientiane.

Ravana is exiled by his father, King of Indrapattanagara and settles at Lanka. Having risen to the paradise of Indra, he takes advantage of the latter's lack of attention to violate a woman of the harem. This woman asks permission to avenge herself. She goes down to earth and becomes the daughter of Ravana. She attempts to kill him, but he exiles her. She is abandoned on a junk and rescued by a hermit who adopts her. The fame of Sita's beauty reaches Rama, who decides to go and marry her. Ravana, no longer remembering that she is his daughter, becomes the rival of Rama. But as Rama is the only one able to lift the magic bow of the hermit, he becomes Sita's husband. At this point comes the episode of the golden gazelle and the carrying away of Sita. Rama pursues his wife, but he is turned into a monkey for three years, because of his wicked karma (Cf. the Buddhist doctrine). He has a son Hamuman. Having taken back his human shape and with the help of Laksmana, Hamuman, and the army of monkeys, he attacks Lanka, kills Ravana and brings Sita back to Vientiane.

000 Vientiane.

538 101 As can be seen, there is a certain originality in the Laotian text. Only the episodes of the golden gazelle, the abduction of Sita and the attack on Lanka are similar to those of the Valmiki poem. In addition the scene is laid in Laos. All the ceremonies are Laotian and many explanations are given of [83] its origin and the creation of numerous muongs, particularly those of the region between Khong and Vientiane. Northern Laos, on the contrary, is seldom mentioned.

Romances

538 There are two kinds, in verse and in prose. As is mentioned by Louis Finot, from whom we borrow the whole passage quoted below, the Laotians have a marked preference for long stories of adventure relieved by their pleasant rhythm. However, neither the actors nor the events of the drama shine by their variety; the characters can be reduced to a small number of types:

1st. The hero. He is naturally a young prince. Naturally, too, he is handsome and in love, but he is a lover who takes no pride in reserve or in fidelity. He merrily takes advantage of every occasion and usually comes back with five or six women whom he has collected by the way. When necessary he lies unscrupulously. He fights and wins, but with the help of magic weapons, which diminishes the merit of his exploits. To increase his dignity, the story-teller gives him the title of bodhisattva which becomes him as little as possible.

2nd. The Rishi. This is a hermit magician. He instructs the hero in occult arts and provides his equipment, a flying horse, miraculous weapons, etc. He also collects abandoned young girls who appear in the nick of time to become the mistresses or wives of the young prince.

3rd. The Yak. This is the enemy of the hero. He also possesses all kinds of magic powers, he flies through the air, takes different shapes, fights with enchanted weapons. He is violent, irascible, voracious and libidinous. He is sometimes good-natured and may become a faithful servant when he has been beaten mercilessly.

[84] 4th. The father-in-law. This is a king from whom his daughter is taken without consulting him. He is constantly furious, grotesque and scoffed at.

5th. Indra. He is the god ex machina. He comes to the aid of compromising situations and sends water at the opportune moment which saves those who are dead. Like a well-trained servant

he answers to the first call. A rishi can be sent to him as a messenge but in case of need an arrow is sufficient. 538 ●

Let us pass on to the women.

6th. The heroine. She is beautiful, loving and faithful, but otherwise rather insignificant. However she shows a certain amount of courage. She does not hesitate to have the guards beaten and to fight alongside her husband.

7th. The Kinnaris. When they catch sight of the young prince asleep, these gay and shameless bird-women hasten to carry him off to their home for not very strict games. However, they are good-natured girls and are ready to repair the damage they have done.

These are the most common types. As for the plot, it hardly varies: a chase on a flying horse, rendez-vous, abductions, separations, fights against the yaks or against angry fathers, women lost and found again, death and resurrection, general reunion and universal rejoicing--that is about the contents of these poems.

But they are of primordial importance in the study of local traditions and customs. A thorough study of the semi-legendary events in these romances, by visiting the places where they are supposed to have occurred, will enable one to obtain results similar to those obtained by Sir Aurel Stein in Kashmir. Let it also be remembered that the text of the Rajatarangini, History of Kashmir, was merely an amalgamation of mythical and legendary themes [85] whose geographic framework was the high Kashmir valleys. The minute exploration of each region mentioned in this compilation has enabled Sir Aurel Stein to distinguish correctly between the true facts of which he has found traces, that is to say the archaeological remains, and the mythical legends. Similar work may be done in Laos.

The most popular romances are Kalaket, Lin Tong, Surivong, Camban, Usabarot and above all Sin Xay (Cf. below Savannakhet).

As for the prose romances, they hardly differ from those in verse except by their form. The basis consists always in the telling of endlessly repeated popular tales. But here the compilers have frequently used the form of the Jataka and given the stories a certain amount of Buddhist coloration.

The remainder of Laotian literature consists chiefly of tales. Many comic or judicial stories reflect the whole popular spirit. Besides, many of them have been incorporated in the Jatakas. Like the romances the Laotian chronicles are heterogeneous compilations of semi-legendary and real events. Many are still unedited, particularly those of the kingdom of Champassak. We can also connect with the literature the

538 inscriptions, some of which go back to the fourteenth century and are [172] in the Laotian language. For the earlier period we have seen above that these inscriptions were either in Sanskrit or in Khmer (Cf. Stele of Sayfong, appendix: Vientiane).

Music

533 Laotian songs belong to the field of poetry and are of two kinds:
538 the one consists of poems celebrating the exploits of legendary heroes,
883 transmitted from father to child, from master to pupil, and often expanded by imaginary improvisations; the others embroider the love theme.

[86] Alternate chants are used, particularly in the courts of love. A young girl sings, a boy answers. These songs have become a traditional game whose social function has been forgotten. They consist of a series of questions and answers. Often the questions are even real puzzles or simple guessing questions. By asking each other questions, the young people try to get to know each other.

It seems as if the origin could be found here of what the Indians call the svayamvara which is the choice of the husband by the woman. This custom is very persistent among the white Thai of the Phongtho region.

534 While vocal music is very prevalent in Laos, there exists also instrumental music which should not be neglected. We summarize here the excellent account given by his Highness Tiao Souvanna Phouma on Laotian music.

"There are three kinds of instruments: a) wind (the khouy and the khene), b) string (the So I and the So O), c) percussion (the Nang Nat and the Khong Vong).

The khene consists of a series of thin bamboos of various and decreasing lengths placed side by side in pairs like the flutes of Pan. Usually these are in seven consecutive rows. These bamboos are joined together by two half gourds attached with wax which form the blowing chamber and have a small circular opening to serve as mouthpiece. On the inside, the bamboos are pierced with holes. The most curious thing about the way the khene functions is that several notes are simultaneous and are absolutely continuous.

The khouy is a flute without any keys, generally made of bamboo and giving very clear tones.

The so, [illegible]s with two strings, consist of a long carved wooden handle and a sounding box. [87] The latter is a half coconut closed by